April 2005

Meet the Professors

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Meet the Professors

We've hunted everywhere. From the largest lecture halls to the tiniest classrooms. From the College of Design to the Rec and everywhere in between. We searched the entire campus for the coolest professors. Here are the instructors that made the grade.

PHOTOS BY: Alyssa Dowd
Matthew Obbink
Janice Baker is the crown jewel of the Iowa State Dance Program. Baker has had a hand in every major dance movement, project, theater, or school in the state of Iowa since the early '70s. Her early training by a vaudevillian sculpted her eccentric love for dance and the stage.

Baker's many areas of interests in dance include ballet, hip-hop, Celtic, ballroom, contemporary, ethnic and barn dancing, to name a few. She currently teaches 13 dance classes at Iowa State as an assistant professor of dance, owns a studio, and runs The Dance Place in Des Moines. She has choreographed for the Des Moines Ballet, Iowa Dance Theatre, and also for area high schools. Baker's former Iowa State students, such as Elizabeth Williams and Paula McArthur, have created prestigious dance careers in the Des Moines area.

To add to Baker's growing list of accomplishments, she has directed and choreographed over 50 musicals for the Des Moines Ingersoll Dinner Theatre, three of which she wrote herself. She trained with famous ballerina Ronnie Mahler from the American Ballet Theatre and her world-renowned Russian instructor, Pasha.

"I think anyone can benefit from being creative, especially in the area of dance. It doesn't matter what type of dance, but when you start dancing, the rest of the world melts away. For that hour or so when dancing, you aren't thinking about anything else, only the dancing. I think that it's important for our society to be able to let go and enjoy something like dance," said Baker.

She eats, breathes, and sleeps dance. Her colorful career contains more experiences and resume material than a typical 50-something professor of dance could dream of.

Personal accomplishments aren't why Baker is involved in dance—rather, it's to bring the rewarding aspects of dance to others.

Her students have gone on to teach at the Julliard School of Ballet, dance with American Ballet Theater and travel with professional German dance companies.

"I base my philosophy in a process that
is equally as important as the product, I find all the students special and rewarding in their own unique ways. Many have successful teaching positions both in theater and in dance."

Baker says, "When I am directing or choreographing a production, I am trying to build the people, not the show. I want to custom the roles to let people shine; I try to make the dance for them. I believe that there are no small parts, but small players."

The Dance Program at Iowa State has about 300 students and only five professors. In the early 1900s at Iowa State, every student at the university was required to take a dance course. In those times, dancing was considered a mark of high society, and dancing was present at every social event. Baker thinks that dancing should return to its original social standing.

"The world co consumes dance. Dancing impacts society. Some people might not think of it in those terms but it's easy to tell if you look around. Dance is large part of the human experience it needs to celebrated more, here at ISU and around the world."

"Dance is important for everyone in every culture, it doesn't matter if someone is dancing at a club or doing ballroom. A dancing society creates a healthy society. To dance is to be human—to dance is to celebrate life," said Baker.

**J. Herman Blake**

By Ward Phillips

J. Herman Blake is a world-renowned expert in African American studies and a master teacher. He was friends with Malcolm X, worked closely with the Black Panther Party, and founded an undergraduate college in California. And this was just the '60s.

Since then, Blake's activist streak has improved the situation for minorities at countless universities across the country. Today, he is a professor of educational leadership and policy studies and the director of the African American Studies program at Iowa State. In this position, he has enacted great change while also serving as a mentor for many of the minority students on campus. Unfortunately for the students of Iowa State, this is Blake's last semester. He's retiring this summer to focus on his writing and research.
Blake grew up in New York, one of seven children in a single-parent household. With only his mother to care for so many children, members of the community helped raise Blake and his siblings. He learned early on the value of community.

But it wasn’t until Blake was stationed in France during the Korean War that he learned the value of family. While his fellow soldiers were out chasing women and getting drunk, Blake spent his time at the village Presbyterian church, where the members welcomed him with open arms. It was at the church Blake met a family who took him in. The family showed Blake that he had real potential and that he could make something big of his life.

However, when Blake returned from the War, he quickly learned how hard it was to keep a job without a college education. He was laid off from the local factory along with others who’d been loyal to the company for years. This sparked Blake’s yearning to help others through social work.

When Blake entered college, he just wanted to get a degree to keep him from getting laid off again, but his professors saw he was setting his goals too low. They constantly encouraged Blake to go beyond the goal of merely keeping a job.

After graduating in 1960 with a degree in social work, Blake went to the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti to perform humanitarian and social work. Blake spent his days working in the communities and playing with children. He fetched honeycomb from bees’ nests for the local families to sell. Blake did anything he could to help others around him—something he’s never stopped doing.

By the time Blake returned to the States, he was convinced social work was his destiny. He enrolled in the sociology graduate program at the University of California Berkeley. It was here that Blake met one of the greatest influences on his life: El-Haj Malik el Shabbazz, better known as Malcolm X. “Malcolm X was one of the most impressive, articulate, and persuasive people I have ever met. I loved him—loved him,” Blake says. Malcolm X and Blake formed a strong friendship. They discussed their feelings and beliefs about the growing civil rights movement.

In 1963, while Blake was a graduate student at Berkeley, Blake interviewed Malcolm X. The tape of the interview and Malcolm X’s speech became legendary. Today, it is a resource for many African American studies classes throughout the country. Being a friend of Malcolm X’s, it’s not surprising that Blake was not a supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the early 60s. In fact, he didn’t have much respect for King. Blake thought he King was too accommodating to the system. He argued against King’s beliefs and turn-the-other-cheek mentality. When King made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 in Washington, D.C., Blake mocked him.

Today, Blake has a different view on King, and has come to accept his philosophy and teachings of nonviolence. “But up until his death, I wanted nothing to do with him,” Blake explains.

During the time Blake was friends with Malcolm X, he earned a doctorate in sociology from Berkeley and took a job teaching at the University of California at Santa Cruz. When the university decided to add another college to the campus, leaders from the Black Liberation Front demanded the new college be a black college. Leaders at UCSC asked Blake, then the only black faculty member on campus, to step in and reach a compromise with the activist group. He did. The new college would be devoted to all ethnic minority groups on campus. Blake became the college’s first provost, a job he retained until 1984.

From there, Blake went to Mississippi, where he took a job as president of Tougaloo College, a small black liberal arts school. From 1987 to 1989, Blake was a visiting professor of social change at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Then from 1989 to 1997, Blake served as Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis. When his wife, Dr. Emily Moore, also a teacher, took a job at Iowa State in 1998, Blake made the move with her.

Blake turned the African American Studies program around upon his appointment as director. In 2002, Blake was awarded the Iowa Professor of the Year award from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Council for Advancement and Support of Education. A few months later, Iowa State honored him with a plaque from the ISU Center for Teaching Excellence. In his acceptance speech Blake said, “After 40 years of teaching at all kinds of institutions ... the best students I’ve encountered are here at Iowa State.”

Perhaps Blake’s legacy at Iowa State lies in another of his quotes, one that truly denotes his impact: “A rising tide lifts all boats.”
Gary Wells
By Maggie Hesby

Gary Wells has spent the past 25 years saving people's lives. An Iowa State psychology professor, Wells has changed the way police lineups work in countless departments across the country. Six states use a police lineup method developed by Wells, a method that has reduced incorrect identification from 25 percent in traditional lineups to 14 percent. It's the people who make up the nine percent difference who owe their freedom to Wells.

Wells is a minor celebrity. He's appeared on NBC's Today Show, Oprah, and 48 Hours. Wells has received national media attention in the New Yorker magazine, the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, and the New York Times.

But how does a person become so successful in a field? Where does a journey such as Wells' begin? It was back in Kansas, Wells says, as an undergraduate at Kansas State University that he first became interested in psychology. Thumbing through the index of his Intro to Psychology textbook, he had an epiphany. "When I looked in the back of a physics textbook or something like that, virtually all those people were dead, or most were. They said psychology was a young science, and there's the proof right there." So it seemed to him that a lot was yet to be discovered. He wanted "to be one who actually ends up in the back of such textbooks." To have "your own ideas, your own studies, your own findings, your own theories" published and recognized was an idea that inspired Wells to begin the study of psychology.

But his interest in eyewitness identification started merely as a "peculiar accident." Wells was in his first year of graduate school at Ohio State University, where he would later receive his doctorate. It was then that an attorney showed up in the halls of the psychology department waving a photo of a police lineup; little did Wells know that this was the launch of his own career. As the Ohio State faculty went back to their offices, Wells approached and spoke with the man. The attorney believed his client had been mistakenly identified in the police lineup. Taking the photo back to his office, Wells pinned it up on the bulletin board for a daily reminder of the imperfections of the judicial system.
Staging crime experiments with a fellow grad student, he was just as surprised as any to see how frequently people misidentify suspects. Wells found that witnesses often made comparative judgments between members of a lineup when they couldn't make decisive identifications. Wells managed to get these studies published in top psychology journals, gaining his first modest attention. He had found his niche. Wells devoted the next decade of his life to researching eyewitness identification.

Around 1978, just after graduating, he published an article in which he made an important distinction among the impacts of different variables on eyewitness identification. Unlike other researchers in his field, Wells focused his research on how police influence the outcomes of lineups. How the witness is given instructions during identification, the actual content of the lineup, the identification procedure itself, and the behaviors of the lineup administrator make up what he calls the "big four" system variables. Wells used these variables for the basis of his research that would change police lineups.

He began a research program based on these initial findings during the 1980s that made him in to the pioneer in eyewitness identification. By 1985, he had developed a better system of sequential lineups. Wells found that witnesses were more accurate when shown a series of suspect photos one at a time, rather than altogether. This prevented the witness from making relative judgments and comparisons to the other suspects.

Wells later designed the double-blind lineup when he became aware of the influence the lineup administrator has on the witness. To Wells, this influence is the most important of the "big four" variables. In the double-blind process, both the administrator of the lineup test and the witness would be "blind" (unknowing) of which position the suspect is in, preventing a police officer's inherent nature to hint to the witness a specific suspect. The double-blind and sequential lineups, the presence of instructions to a witness, and other decisive criteria for eyewitness identifications were all developed and published by Wells by 1988.

However, it wouldn't be until the late 1990s that any would gain significant attention. "There's an interesting background story to how long this stuff has taken, because we knew probably 90% of these four things that I just mentioned, and those were all reasonably developed by 1988. It's only been, though, since 2001 that any jurisdictions have made this change," says Wells.

The legal system finally began to pay attention as the development of forensic DNA led to exonerations of innocent people. But because 90 percent of cases are solved from a witness's personal account rather than by DNA evidence, it makes it extremely difficult to positively identify the accused.

"Five years from now, we will see this applied," proclaims Wells confidently, of the sequential line-ups, double-blind line-ups, and proper instructing and procedural behaviors that have begun popping up in a few states now. "Recognition always comes later."

It was in 1996 that Wells' big break came. He got a call from the U.S. Department of Justice. They wanted him to meet with a group of government officials in Washington, D.C., to discuss the future of DNA evidence.

"Secret Service agents began searching my briefcase. Just then, Attorneys General Janet Reno entered, and the beginning of a friendship emerged. She wanted his expert advice on mistaken identification, and after working on such cases for nearly two decades, Wells was able to answer many of her questions. After the meeting, Reno invited Wells to join a panel under he National Institute of Justice to develop the first set of national guidelines on eyewitness identification. The panel's recommendations were published nearly two-and-a-half more then two years later, in 1999. Wells is recognized as a prominent witness lineup expert all over the world. His prodigious and groundbreaking research has prevented countless innocent people from being charged with crimes. Wells has changed the judicial system as we know it. As for Wells, his ideas will be studied and practiced long after his time. And undoubtedly, the next generation will be reading about him in their college textbooks."